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TAGS: PREL LE SY KV AL IZ MU

SUBJECT: DEMARCHE IN ADVANCE OF ARAB LEAGUE MINISTERIAL:
OMAN WARNS OF PENDING DISASTER OVER LEBANON

REF: A. STATE 19473

1B. MUSCAT 118

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for reasons 1.4 (B and D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Pointing to Lebanon as the critical issue, Omani Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusef bin Alawi offered a gloomy forecast for the Arab League (AL) foreign ministers meeting scheduled later this week in Cairo and potentially for the AL Summit later this month. The Ambassador called on bin Alawi March 2 to deliver ref A demarche in advance of the March 5 AL ministerial. Bin Alawi offered a quick summary of discussions at the March 1 GCC foreign ministers meeting in Riyadh, calling attention to an unusually harsh presentation on Syria and Iran by Saudi FM Sa'ud Al Feisal. Oman has not yet decided who will represent the Sultanate in Damascus, but it will not be Sultan Qaboos. The minister also reported that the GCC had issued a statement following yesterday's foreign ministers meeting in support of Kosovo independence; Oman, however, will withhold its decision at least until after the OIC Summit later in the month. End Summary.

Lebanon: A Test for the Arab League

¶2. (C) Bin Alawi described Sa'ud Al Feisal's argument on Syria at the March 1 GCC FM gathering in Riyadh as "unusually tough." Essentially, the Saudis are looking to force Damascus to choose whether "it is with Iran or the Arabs," using Lebanon and the AL Summit as the test. The Saudi reportedly characterized the Lebanon crisis in terms of Iran's attempt to establish hegemony in the Arab world, which (quoting the Saudi FM) "is unacceptable." According to bin Alawi, FM Sa'ud Al Feisal called on the GCC and broader AL to "fully isolate Damascus" if the Syrians are unwilling to back down and allow the Lebanese presidential election to proceed, with Sleiman the expected winner.

¶3. (C) Bin Alawi said he was struck by not only the gravity of Sa'ud Al Feisal's words but also the apparent attempt to cast the Lebanon issue now in terms of "the Arab world versus Iran." "We are not ready to accept that," said the Omani minister. Instead, he said, the AL must break down the problem and look for interest groups prepared to compromise. In his view, Michel Aoun is the most intransigent, bent on throwing up as many obstacles to the election as possible in the vain hope of getting himself elected. However, bin Alawi opined that March 14, Amal and even Hezbollah might be ready to strike a deal in the interest of avoiding the chaos of Lebanon without a president for an indefinite period of time. Therefore, he argued for one last AL attempt at bridging differences among these groups before giving in to the Saudi argument. He said that at the AL ministerial he and others would make one final push for this approach.

¶ 4. (C) Bin Alawi stated that even if there is a Lebanese president, the Saudis are unlikely to send anyone higher than their ambassador to Damascus to the March 27 Summit, "if it happens." He would not hazard a guess on the level of representation of other Arab governments, but predicted it would not be well attended. Oman has not decided on its representation, but the Sultan would definitely not attend. Concluding his discussion of Lebanon, the Omani minister commented that Lebanon and the threat of a canceled summit presented the Arab League with its "most difficult test in years," one with the real possibility of seriously undermining the credibility of the AL and Arab unity.

Kosovo: GCC Support May Not Mean Recognition

¶ 5. (C) Bin Alawi said the GCC had issued a statement following the GCC FM meeting in Riyadh March 1 in support of Kosovo independence. However, GCC governments reportedly agreed to delay individual decisions on recognition and any subsequent announcement until after the OIC Summit later this month. He avoided clearly stating whether any GCC states, including Oman, had reached a decision, deferring to the OIC Summit and, in Oman's case, the traditional approach of withholding such decisions until there was an exchange of ambassadors.

Iraq: Foreign Fighters Exacerbates Saudi-Syrian Rift

¶ 6. (C) Bin Alawi agreed with our point on Syria's tolerance, if not open facilitation, of movement of foreign fighters through its territory into Iraq. However, he could not explain the apparent contradiction between the fact that almost all the foreign fighters are Sunnis with Al Qa'ida connections and the claim that they are backed by Shi'a Iran.

(Comment: Despite previously provided background information from us on Iran's support for both Al Qa'ida and the Taliban, bin Alawi appears wedded to the view that Shi'a Iranians would not support Sunni terrorists. End comment.) The larger concern, however, was that this is yet another issue stoking Saudi animus toward Damascus. He did not expect significant attention to be devoted to this issue in Cairo, given the looming matter of Lebanon and attendant Saudi-Syrian feud.

Comment

¶ 7. (C) Per ref B, the Omanis see Lebanon)- and concomitantly, the Arab League -- on the brink and compromise, even capitulation, preferable to disaster. After Sa'ud Al Feisal's reported apocalyptic assessment of the Iranian challenge and Syria's estrangement from its Arab brethren, bin Alawi seemed to cast the upcoming summit in almost existential terms. Challenged to describe a viable AL plan if, on the eve of the summit, there is no acceptable Lebanese president, bin Alawi could only acknowledge the "disaster for Lebanon and for the Arab League itself," not only for having failed to address a problem entirely within itself but also having to face the prospect of Saudi Arabia's doomsday scenario of Iran as the common enemy of the Arabs.
GRAPPO